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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: CHARGE PRESSES REFORM WITH EGYPTIAN COUNCIL FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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1. (U) Summary: Members of the American-Egyptian Relations Committee of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs invited the Charge to discuss the bilateral relationship during an informal session on May 31. The event provided an opportunity to stress the importance to the bilateral relationship of free and fair elections, and to promote the idea that international observers would increase confidence in the upcoming presidential and parliamentary elections. End summary.

2. (U) The newly formed American-Egyptian Relations Committee of the Egyptian Council for Foreign Affairs (ECFA) invited the Charge to an informal session on May 31 to review the bilateral relationship. The ECFA is a well-regarded group of former diplomats, lawyers, development consultants, and businesspeople. The Charge began by giving a brief assessment of how U.S.-Egypt bilateral relations have changed over the past three years, noting that, on the whole, relations were better. He singled out the upcoming elections as the most important factor affecting the future of the relationship.

3. (SBU) Most of the ensuing discussion focused on the May 25 referendum and the upcoming Egyptian elections. The ECFA members characterized the constitutional change to allow multiparty elections as a good initial step, though they acknowledged that it came too late to allow for a serious challenge to President Mubarak. The Charge noted that the USG will follow closely how the election is conducted. Responding to a question on what would constitute a free and fair election, the Charge called for the absence of violence, or coercion, equal access to media for the candidates, freedom of association, and international observers.

4. (SBU) When asked what would happen to the bilateral relationship if there were no observers and the elections were not regarded as fair, the Charge noted that this outcome would likely color how the U.S. deals with Egypt for years to come. One member asked what the USG has done or could do to help Egypt run a fair election. The Charge noted that the USG has offered technical election assistance to the GOE, but has not received a response or any specific requests for assistance. However, he noted that the Embassy is nonetheless moving forward with election-related activities to be implemented by Egyptian and U.S. NGOs.

5. (SBU) Comment: While this group was openly supportive of further reform and interested in preserving a strong bilateral relationship, the members were very concerned about the prospects for fair elections. The group seemed to be searching for an assurance that no serious damage would come to the bilateral relations even if the presidential and parliamentary election processes were not free and fair. They implied that the very introduction of a multi-candidate election merited recognition and should satisfy the USG for the time being. End comment.

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GRAY